# The Trial of the Korybantes
# (Η δίκη του Κορυβάντες)

What do I remember about The Trial of the Korybantes? It was in Athens, it was a warm night, my cousin (and host in the city) was sick and so I was wandering more or less aimlessly in the streets of Keramikos[1] when I saw the sign: plain but stark, black and white, pasted hastily on the palimpsestuous side of the mailbox. I was even in the mood for something rather dark, something confined and elaborate, with strong tension, an element of suspense, off-putting, ultimately very elegant and with a sense of what it means to be trapped. So I couldn't resist the urge to go see the whole production; at the time I was slightly obsessed with that kind of drama in general, it felt like I would be able to really identify with the spectacle and also what it spoke for. So I walked around a while longer until the start time.

Catching a bus back to the theatre was too bright: the driving there in Athens is not really worse than ours, but somehow performed by all in a certain code of frustration — playful, contentious, enjoyable, mildly nauseating. I went down into the front room, it was all in the basement under a clothing store. The air was still light, the space open and with a suitably tasteful sparseness to it. There was no space left for me, it became clear, when I talked to the older fellow at the little table by the foot of the stairs, but he assured me in a slow and predictably tilted English that we would figure something out. The rest of the crowd down there seemed normal enough, adults and thoughtfully so in their calm conversations. After a short wait, the door opened to the large and low second room, the interior of the basement. There were no seats left, but the man from the table had found a stool, which was lodged somewhat awkwardly in the back corner of the further gallery. We filed in and sat down, places were not assigned. The lights went low over us.

And then it was The Trial of the Korybantes.

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Well, going in I had a lot of familiarity with Kafka and his aesthetic world (his sensibility, *la sensibilité soi-meme*, its a way of being sensitive to the world; Kafka's aesthetic is markedly clean, he's finely tuned, we know his family thought of him as skinless). It's an aesthetic that is sharply attuned to the ambient quality of meaning, or its mood; Kafka's worlds have the mood of when meaning has, we've just realized, sort of broken down. We can remember (all too fondly) this strangest sense that things used to mean something, that there was some order, some stable shelf to which all our sentiments and purposes were sublimated. But now all we know is that it's gone, we can't find the handhold anymore and we are swept away in the current of a present that strikes us as a crisis. What are the dimensions of this crisis, what are its poetic opportunities?

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[1] Below the hills and above the excavated graves, which like the scorched roofless houses were open to the starlight, streetlight, the many cats, warm coastal grasses (their fragrance, their effulgence, and their seedy proliferation), and the lively sounds of the Athenian evening traffic: boisterous, relaxed, unassuming, highly put on, not very hopeful, indeed a little defeated, wonderful and good.

Well, it's like we've dropped our groceries, it's like we can't defend ourselves against the terrible accusation that we can no longer remember how things are supposed to work.[2] This is the mood of the crisis of meaning which is the aesthetic setting of almost all of Kafka's very profane comedies. It's the mood of having a bad problem on your hands, which is essentially the problem of not knowing how to trust in the world, certainly not having much trust in your transactions with others or even the things you still think you know. This missing feeling of trust is the sensibility brought out by a deferred contact with *truth* — in all of Kafka's many parables and stories, this mysterious presence has just about all the stage time as Godot. In Kafka's aesthetic world, truth is a vague rumour, something that you even only kind of remember how to feel entitled to, like rivers full of salmon or frozen ponds fit for hockey all through the bright winter might be for us readers of today. So, a lack of trust in truth: yes, a problem indeed.

Walter Benjamin opens up one angle of approach towards this problem in his short essay, 'Some Reflections on Kafka'. There, Benjamin writes that Kafka sacrificed truth for the sake of its transmissibility. The result of this sacrifice is that, in Kafka's literary world, there is no wisdom, but only the products of wisdom's decay.[3] This seems to be the thrust of the priest's analysis of the parable of the door, in which there exists a slippage between the once-sturdy opposition of correct understanding and misunderstanding. With the parable of the doorway to the law, the aim is not to communicate truth, but to pose truth as this disturbing problem. In the situation of the open door, interpretation is less a movement towards what is true than it is an expression of despair.[4] And in the moment of indecision before the law, this coming to expression, this strategy or tactic of interpretation, seems to be the instinct of the protagonists in Kafka's literary worlds.

In *The Trial*, the central question for K. can be stated thus: Why am I alone before this door? Why can I alone see the light shining out from it? On a more removed register, that light leads us as readers to ask *why* its significance seems to have slipped away from any kind of concrete or shareable ground of sense. Like those who, in Kafka's stories, stand disoriented before the Law, when we come to his symbols, we find ourselves as if standing before a sentry, but without having been given the secret password. In other words, like the law, his writing receives you when you come, and dismisses you when you go. The whole action of the story revolves around the withered gestures that K. conjures as he comes and goes before the open door. And, it might be reasonable to ask, as we read, what will we do when it's our turn?

Fairytales for dialecticians, yes. There is this incessant shifting of weight between one foot and another. And I also come to Kafka by way of a recent conversation I had with my friend Adam, who has long been an enjoyer of Kafka and an appreciator of one of his most famous disciples,

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[2] In mathematical terms, the normal symbolic algebra of allusion and contrast resolves into no recognizable integer; the whole solution seems to remain somehow in remainder, a different and unexpected kind of figure.

[3] In this landscape of decay, it is unclear if the gesture of signification retains the strength necessary to carry its act out to the end; in Kafka, something in the expected correspondence between the symbol and its true content has come loose. It is thus a literature which resists the programmatic study that its mystery inevitably incites.

[4] This may appear in the words of those who gather around the law; more often, it expresses itself in the very bodies of those whom the law addresses, marked as they are by the mystery which summons them and sends them away.

Haruki Murakami. Adam was saying that, in both Kafka and Murakami, there is this really wonderful feeling of being on a path (even though there are no signs, the path suggests some protocols, we seem to be called as if by gentle rules down a certain direction); both of them use this ambient atmosphere to send the reader deeper into their own imagination. These delicate structures — anything that sets you back in that way of imagining alleys, foggy low places where the light of streetlamps draws our focus — are treasures worthy of contemplation.

Yet another master of these human geographies of being lost and wondering around is the excellent Jorge Luis Borges, who was an admirer of Kafka and wrote a short essay on him. Borges wrote in thinking of Kafka that every writer produces their own precursors: in our working through and rewording of our intellectual or aesthetic inheritances, we cast a light backwards that catches unexpected corners and, landing across distant surfaces, both projects interesting shadows and illuminates oddly useful relics. It is for us a useful essay if only because it gives us a few more precious footholds from which to launch ourselves into describing The Trial of the Korybantes.

The first foothold Borges offers is Zeno's famous paradox of movement; in other words, he affords us the opportunity to think of the asymptote as the fundamental structure of Kafka's writing, and indeed we have already considered together the asymptotic nature of the characteristic gesture of interpretation in his work. The second theme would be our experience, habit, or perhaps our trepidation and anxiety of misrecognition of the sacred animal (or less specifically the sign in general). The third foothold is actually more of a slackline, suspended in the tension between Kierkegaard and Kafka's slightly different sensibilities to the comedic dimensions of waiting for the messiah (and the obedient attention to uncertain tasks this peculiar form of patience demands). The fourth is really just another point about the almost sardonic pleasure Kafka seems to take in making a joke of our eschatological condition. The fifth is sweet: a little nod to the theme of joyous overpreparation which is a feature not only of Kafka's work but of much Jewish literature and habit in general; the sixth would be about the moment at which one notices that they have prepared for the wrong exam, or that preparation for the exam was not strictly speaking useful since the period we have to write it is infinite, and we are not allowed to leave until it is over.

To these careful genealogies I might add, off the cuff, two similarly disparate lineages from Kafka who have come between Borges and myself. On the one hand, there is the special kind of attention embodied by the documentary videographer John Wilson, which at once and somehow togetherly illuminates deformity and beauty, and whose work is, much like Kafka's, both fiercely ridiculous of the injustice of the Law and carefully structured to an extreme degree.[5] To find a similarly languorous eroticism to Kafka, consider the music of the Montreal producers Neo Edo or noo, and the elaborately soft traps of the Bach Suites by Yo-Yo Ma or early aughts Radiohead.

[5] A similar mastery of confused discomfort and the resilient quest for some (often pretty pathetic) shreds of meaning can be found in Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man*, but this connection will be a bit more obvious.

Another critic who makes responsible use of Kafka is Valerie Greenberg, who draws together Kafka and Max Planck in a curious *mise en dialogue* to prove the point that all texts are literary in just about the same way, and that the scientific theory, like the germinal theory at the heart of any parable, is all about bringing about a certain kind of sensitivity (whether in mood or in whatever intellect is) — in other words, both kinds of texts are artistic, and so both strive to modify consciousness and organize new modes of sensibility according to their inner laws.[6]

What are the themes of this comparative reading? Greenberg draws out a transgressiveness both authors display towards the standards of their field — a flexibility both embody despite their unflinching regard for metrical rules and classical tactics of organization. They are in this way *experimental* writers in both senses of the word: playful and inventive; rigorous, repetitive, carefully designed, and neurotically constrained. On whether this has something to do with the local German spirit they shared, Greenberg is probably not diffident enough. This experimental quality of their writing is what lays the frame for their focus on corruptions of order — as theorists they both operate in realms beyond the ordinary, where new forces are in place and all things shimmer with a strange and unspeakable quality.

Despite or perhaps because of this chaotic sensitivity (for both writers there is a fracture or an error to the sense of interiority), the two literatures abound with situations in which scenes of inscription and calculation spring up unexpectedly, bespoke instruments gather to trace the effects of matter that until yesterday never even registered as a cause for concern. Similarly in both literatures the function of the zero is heightened to an extreme degree (it is a symbol as simple as the door; its wry signification recalls of the asymptotic, as erotic a frustration as can be imagined). Are there any structural regularities behind this ordered and disciplined articulation of thought, thought that is always driving its nails into a substance as fluid and broad as the ocean? As readers, they cultivate in us a pure as innocent desire that it might be so.

Both authors seem to know that naming is lying. How can any law come to accept this? Their mandate is a proscription against certainty entirely — for Kafka in the form of a constant tragicomic vigilance, for Planck in the form of a sober acceptance and commitment to science anyways. In this existential situation, they are liberated to imagine characters charged with a radical autopoetic potential: Josef K., who always seems poised on the edge of surprising himself; or Planck with his vision of the new material of a probabilistic world, the self-fashioning subject of the laws of chance, breaking out from surface across the quantum threshold, pulsing in the compulsive joyfulness of radiation without needing any clear reason or cause. Paradoxically, such a situation renders transgressive the trust required for reading.

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[6] One wonders if Kafka knew that the writing way is probably not the best and certainly not the most direct way to get at mood? At least Planck had the cloud chamber as a second kind of moody production in the material of language as such; Kafka (unless he was privately an excellent dancer) seems to have been trapped in the language of man. Greenberg, dubious of the limits of human language, is smart to go after the models of thinking and manner of investigation proper to modern physics as the most distilled relic of Planck's interventions into the ambient; from Kafka, perhaps, we only inherit certain strategies for enduring the lifelong inscription of destiny onto our bodies. Greenberg's claim is that translation between all these attitudes in not only possible but highly useful.

One last reader, then, to send us on our way. Hannah Arendt, who I think of as both a sister and as a kind of father (when she disappoints me, it is the disappointment felt for a member of the family), has a lovely essay on Kafka called "Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew." She characterizes him as a writer of intensity and radical simplicity. She deploys this fantastic and ridiculous line: "Kafka's German is to the infinite plurality of linguistic styles what water is to the infinite plurality of possible beverages." She makes him out to be an artist of the medium of perfection itself. Which he is, too. Her portrait of Kafka is tender and very earnest.

On the subject of The Trial, she reminds us that the point of the story is to communicate to us an experience of truth; the truth in question is the sublime nature of what we experience as necessity. We are fascinated by what is automatic, I think we are almost willing to surrender everything to it (I really might, for example, let a robot fuck me; at least, I am eager to have a role and to play it well). For Arendt, the play reveals the inner drama of K. learning of necessity; its afterlife, awfully, was to preemptively offer an interpretation of the kinds of trials experienced by victims of wars and administrations of 'necessary' violence — Jewish history has long been marked by these trials, and historians of contemporary Jewishness cannot shy away from our administration of this kind of violence in Gaza and the wider region any longer.

Arendt's reading of Kafka reorients us in at least two important directions, then: firstly, she brings us out of the mind a bit and into the world, directing us away from structures of thinking and experience to structures of the world. This social and political reading of Kafka charges his work with a much stronger ethical potential — this is, after all, the story of a man's humiliation and execution by the state — and thus clarifies a further question posed by his work. It arrives just behind the first question, which is posed by Kafka's exploration of meaninglessness, and asks, 'What do you make of this?' — and it asks, 'What are you going to do about it?'

For Arendt, and quite possibly for Kafka as well, the shame is to simply follow along; this is to miss or forsake the opportunity to become a person, to become a judge, to speak and stand against the events with some kind of interiority and security, to hold up the internal conversation that comes to terms with things by exercising action. For us readers of today, who no longer fully believe in "the freedom of man," despite our intimate knowledge of "his capacity to change the world," the terrible world of Kafka takes on an again-renewed strangeness. Nonetheless we deeply sympathize with his protagonists, and their general situation of having a role which is "utterly indeterminate." In both cases, the cause of this destabilization is only the appearance of whatever it is that seems automatic, and which thus threatens to leave us behind or root us out.

What makes Kafka's worlds terrible is this way in which they leave no room for good will, which they show, paradoxically, can never be automatic, as if it were a matter of necessity. The consoling humour of Kafka's work is his ability to convince us right at the moment of disaster that we are greater than our failures and that we transcend our confusions by the means of the very faculty of imagination that his plain yet incredibly elegant work both demands and invites. Hidden in his laughter is a yearning for a world we in which we might take part as ourselves.

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So this was my Kafka as I sat down to watch The Trial of The Korybantes. I was coming, then, to a world with a terrible Law, a Law with a terrible strength and force. But ultimately, a Law that is ridiculous because it is something we choose without having had to (though we couldn't see that at all at the time). It's not very erotic, but slightly arousing perhaps just to the point of being uncomfortably noticeable. Truth was in the room, but on the shoulders of some people I could barely trust, let alone understand. In the dark room time spun out of its axis.

As for the plot, I had not too long ago read the book, *The Trial*, with Daniel in Halifax, so the broadest strokes of the story remained fairly ready in my memory. I remembered, for example, the first visit of the officers of the Law over that pale breakfast. I remembered the stuffy and thick rafters of the first office of the Law. I remembered the magistrate's house with its corners of shame and the twisted painting. I remembered the slick wet stones before the cathedral. I remembered K.'s office, with its sheets and grids. I remembered the sick attic of the artist. I remembered the current of confusion and misery waiting for an answer.

As for the play, what I remember most now (it's been almost half a year) is the x-ray, the documents discussed in voices hung hard with years of smoke; I remember the campy artist (Titorelli maybe) like a gay Tiresias, the lewd uncle; I remember the perfect whipping scene where he (the young man, so handsome with a face cut from stone, he wasn't even an actor, someone told me) kneeled high over the other one (old, stately, perfect, a face like some symbol grown from an old root), bent him low, and blessed his back in the worship of the punisher. I remember most of all the last scene, when Ioseph Kappa took on the manic air of one making a rash decision, and walked himself with commitment to the gun. The shot fell him behind the other wing of the audience. Yet he was noble, too, as he meekly accepted his execution.

I don't remember a cathedral scene, though often the two beautiful actors walked each other in stride and shared long and low conversation about the case — in these moments the Law was almost beautiful, almost free from the shame of being judged, almost innocent of its own constitution: we, who make the Law by turning others into our judges (without their knowledge and likely against their will), who conscript them silently into our programs of accusation, in these moments of sober consideration, are like children pulling the thread out of the sweaters we feel stuck in, making a mess in our panic to scrape freedom from the dirty surface of life.

It really was interesting when the artist pulled those x-rays out of his box — the secret to the Law, the secret to Ioseph Kappa's case. 'It's in the fibres of your very body,' he might have said, I know he smiled insanely. 'The Law is somewhere in the negative space of this glance inside, even your translucent bones do not harbour its open signature.' Still, we shared Ioseph Kappa's uncertainty — what in this forbidden vision (which goes inwards, the wrong direction) might arm us against the forces of shame which conspire to poison our wealth? How does this irradiated visibility grant us any separation from the mute and intractable fear that saturates the flesh, that runs through the grainy densities we see through this glossy page?

As for the set, I will just borrow the words of Nektarios-Georgios Konstantinidis, whose captured it will in his review from December 6 of 2022 in *Théatre du blog*:

> Cela se passe au sous-sol du théâtre-laboratoire de recherche Koryvantes. Dans la pénombre, salle et scène ne font qu'un et forment un univers kafkaïen engendrant angoisse et terreur. Le public, en témoin oculaire, fait l'expérience de la situation absurde et du cauchemar vécu par M. K.. A la lumière des bougies et dans une pénombre qui dissimule et dévoile à la fois une scène-labyrinthe où se déroule chaque séquence. Ici, le temps se dilate avec de longs silences éloquents mais avec aussi des bruits et des musiques qui augmentent la peur.

As for the performances, they were like glass: measured, smooth with hardness, cool to the touch, liquid trapped (willingly or not) in the stolidity of the solid form. Andreas Kokakis was convincing and mature as Ioseph Kappa. Andreas Theocharis was dextrous, powerful, wise, and depraved as the rest of the cast. His tilted dance in the strobing interlude was genuinely one of the most wonderful moments; I trust without being certain that his intention was to teach us how to spit in the face of the cop in our heart. Against the forces of alienation so many read brutally into Kafka, Theocharis retrieves the queerness and the elation of heart which are, on my reading, the true sources of his comedy, and the wellsprings of his patient ability to produce beautiful little crystals, which he must sit on in secret like a gorgeous mother duck. We dancers in that mad and joyous style know what it means to nurse and swaddle such precious stones. The secret is to not transform your hurt into a will to seek revenge on unpredictability; only learn to adapt, shine.

It's strange and useful practice to watch theatre in a foreign language. Actors follow necessity; every step is drenched with intention and direction. When we don't understand what they're saying, this glistening automaticity of the theatrical performance speaks for itself. We watch them crash and fly around the stage; they seem driven perfectly from within. Each gasp and murmur of the audience is mysterious and gets drawn up into the mystery of the performance. We build theories, carried on by the impetuous fervour of the montage effect, but each one crumbles as the scene produces a new incongruent piece. Watch, interpret, redesign.

I was anxious as I watched because I was missing a dance. Who knows what was going on right above and all around my head? Even the thoughts of my neighbour were as perfectly inaccessible as some holy truth, I would only smudge and tatter their fabric as I tried to decode the unfamiliar texture (I was primed and trembling like a vast nervous musculature). The Trial of the Korybantes taught me that I am absolutely contained, stuck, sealed in. I waste my time in straining against the edges; the curtainless and unbounded exteriority is only some abstract wish.

Well, that's why we love the ecstasy of dance — the name of the theatre turns out to be incredibly apt. Get me out of this Law, get me away from this judgement! I want to float above the surface of my own memory like Ioseph Kappa, stunned behind days of difficult sleep but absolutely unpredictable as I interpret the wind and seek mild places to press my body against the bars. Guard a powerful future, brandish your shield against complaint. Worship all exotic protective mother gods. Keep them fresh with wildness. Explain nothing. Look handsome.

Translation of the Program

The performance is dedicated to the memory of our beloved Teacher and Friend:
Haras Bakonikola

Theatrical adaptation of the novel of the same name by Franz Kafka.

Conception, direction: Andreas Theocharis - Vangelis Felouzis - Andreas Kokakis
Interpretation: Andreas Theocharis – Andreas Kokakis

It is a nice and very instructive performance, the march, which we call the march with the horses in the dreams.

We have been playing it for many years now. The person who invented it has long since died of tuberculosis, but this legacy has remained and we still see no reason to take the course off the schedule, especially since our competitors cannot imitate it, because it is, though it may not seem so at first glance, inimitable.

LITTLE MYTH

Ah! said the mouse, the world grows smaller every day. First it was so wide that I was afraid, I ran and I was happy to see walls in the distance. But those far walls close so fast that I'm already in the last room, and there in the corner is the trap and I'm running towards it. "You just have to change direction" the cat told him, and then ate him.

And so vast is the world that surrounds my head. But how can I free it without falling apart? Anyway, I prefer to scatter in a thousand shards than to bury him inside me. Because that's why I'm here, about that I have no doubt.

K. was notified by phone that there would be a short hearing on his case the following Sunday. His attention was drawn to the fact that these interrogations would follow each other regularly, perhaps not every week, but more and more often as time went on.

After all, Sunday was preferred as the day of the interrogation, so that K. would not be disturbed at work. They were certainly expecting him on Sunday, if he had no objection.

It was self-evident that he had to present himself, there was no need to point it out to him. They gave him the number of the house where he had to go. It was a house, in some secluded street, where he had never been before...

Words are magical places. They leave fingerprints on the brain capable of suddenly turning into footprints: the footsteps of History. We must watch our every word.

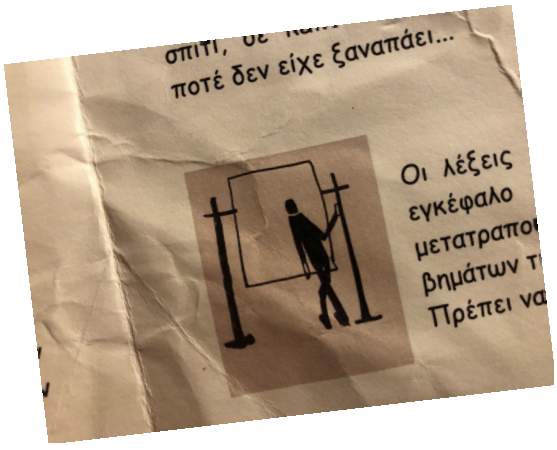
Being accused simply because he thinks is the greatest complaint that Kafka makes in his entire work. It boils down to the belief that being a thinking being and being human are intertwined. And he asks the priest in one phase of the Trial:

“How can I be accused since I am human?”

By giving such an integral view to man, Kafka leaves him all alone in the universe, without the crutches of a god. He has no help from no one and offers none to anyone, provided that everyone respects him. On the contrary, he believes and testifies to the darkness of Power, incredibly hostile to individuals. However, he believes that we are all responsible for the image of social wretchedness in which we swim....

But who rules? Who’s to blame? No principle is present in Kafka's books. All those present declare themselves or others on their behalf that to be lower executive officers.

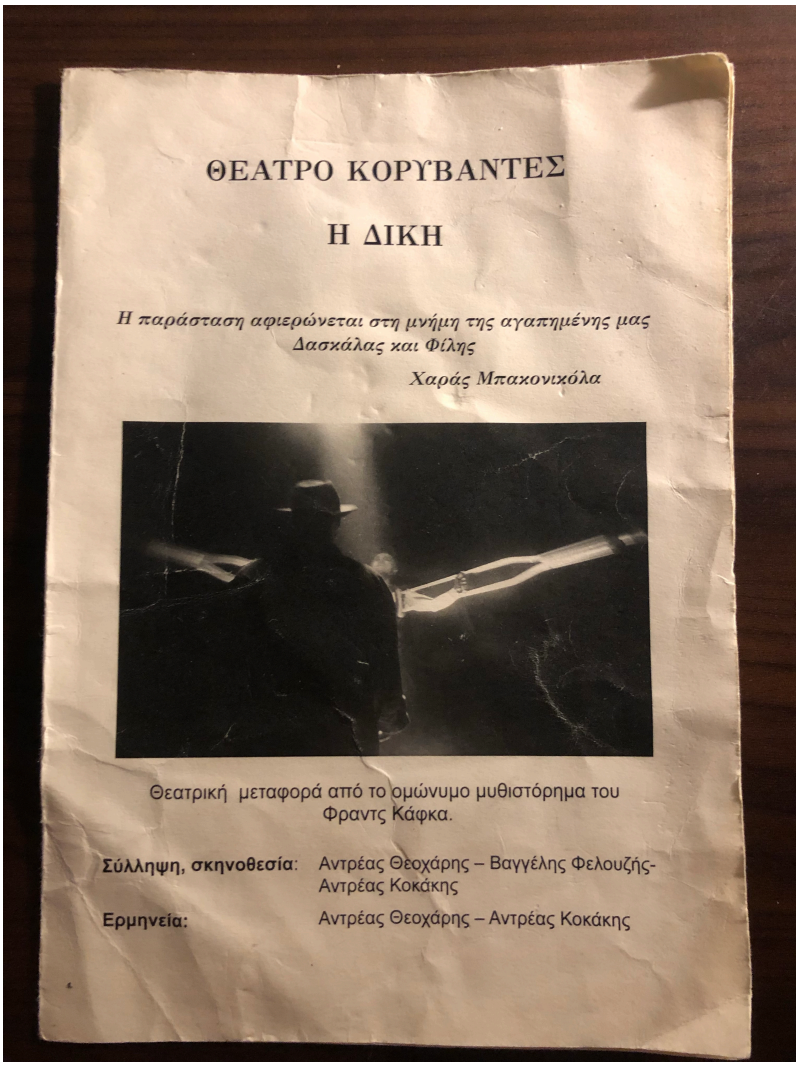
Slaves, slaves, slaves,



springing up from everywhere, arresting civilian defendants or executing them, waiting for promotions or losing them, as the prison guards arresting K declare, “our careers are finished sir... we had hopes of promotion and very soon we will be presented to the whips” But whose?

Lili Zografou, “Our Contemporary Kafka”

All the rest are texts by Franz Kafka.



ΘΕΑΤΡΟ ΚΟΡΥΒΑΝΤΕΣ

Η ΔΙΚΗ

*Η παράσταση αφιερώνεται στη μνήμη της αγαπημένης μας Δασκάλας και Φίλης*

*Χαράς Μπακονικόλα*

Θεατρική μεταφορά από το ομώνυμο μυθιστόρημα του Φραντς Κάφκα.

**Σύλληψη, σκηνοθεσία**: Αντρέας Θεοχάρης – Βαγγέλης Φελουζής- Αντρέας Κοκάκης

**Ερμηνεία**: Αντρέας Θεοχάρης – Αντρέας Κοκάκης

Overall, it may have been a waste of time. I walked back to my dirty hostel in the darkness, confused, past the national garden, I felt sad, I bought myself a coke and drank it on the steps.